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ABSTRACT

Religious services and programs have been a feature of U.S. broadcasting since regularly-scheduled radio began in the 1920s. With the emergence of television, broadcast religion is more pervasive than ever before. It has also become the focus of debate over its role in United States politics. Televangelism is best regarded as a dialogue between communicators and audiences, not a magical tool by which the few manipulate the behavior of the many. This is not an assertion that the video preachers have somehow failed. Rather, their followings suggest that they are succeeding at what the mass media can do best: to engage, through the skillful use of symbols, the inner conflicts and anxieties of large numbers of people, and then to skillfully read and adapt the message to the responses which the audience is constantly transmitting back. (BZ)

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The New Christian Right and the Powers of Television

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I. INTRODUCTION

Religious services and programs have been a feature of American broadcasting since regularly-scheduled radio began in the 1920s. Father Coughlin's broadcasts were widely heard, and widely-debated, during the 1930s; and some television preachers such as Rev. Oral Roberts have been on the air for decades. But the emergence during the 1970s of new technologies, and a new generation of aggressive "video ministers" such as the Revs. Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Jim Bakker, have made broadcast religion more pervasive than ever before. Robert Booth Fowler reports that nearly a quarter of the nation's radio stations are religious stations, and that the overwhelming majority of these are evangelical in character. And while much higher costs mean that only about five percent of all television stations broadcast religious programs full-time, individual broadcasts are available virtually everywhere in the country.[1]

At the same time that this "electronic church" has become increasingly pervasive, it has also become the focus of debate over its role in American politics.[2] The uncertain separation of church and state in America, events during recent political campaigns, and (at times) the optimistic political claims of prominent preachers themselves have fueled this debate, and have given rise to dire predictions about armies of activists mobilized and controlled from the video pulpit. This debate continues; earlier this year, Time magazine rediscovered the

video ministers in a rather breathless article,[3] contending (among other things) that "Preachers like Robertson command audiences that form, if not a true Moral Majority, at least several potent and readily mobilized minorities".[4]

It seems clear by now, however, that neither the claims of the ministers, nor the fears of their critics, have been fully borne out. "We have enough votes to run the country....And when the people say, 'We've had enough', we are going to take over," Robertson was quoted as saying in 1980.[5] But nothing of the sort has occurred; nor do the televangelists seem likely to impose a theocratic orthodoxy upon others. There is much dispute over the size of the audiences involved; as Moral Majority Inc., Christian Voice and other groups began to make their presence felt in the 1980 presidential race, some commentators spoke of weekly audiences of thirty to fifty million committed viewers. But more reliable estimates place Rev. Falwell's weekly audience at about one and a half million,[6] of which the politically committed must be just a part. Many ministers have encountered money troubles. Political success has not been easy either; the "social agenda" of Christian legislation has taken a back seat to more pressing issues in Congress and the bureaucracy, while efforts at the state and local levels to change school curricula or to remove "un-Christian" books from libraries and schoolrooms have succeeded in some places but failed in others.

The "video pulpit" is highly visible, but it apparently cannot

compete with the top echelons of political life. A recent Gallup Poll[7] showed that 44% of a national sample had heard of Rev. Pat Robertson, and that 33% "knew something about" him. This is certainly a respectable showing, and in a list of Republican presidential hopefuls ranked Robertson ahead of figures such as Jack Kemp (39% recognition) and Paul Laxalt (26%). But it was still only enough to put Robertson in the middle of the list of 21 possible candidates, far behind George Bush (93%) and even Elizabeth Dole (53%)--and this, after several years of carefully-contrived television exposure on "700 Club" broadcasts. Rev. Robertson's presidential candidacy did not fare well in the recent Michigan delegate-selection process, despite solid financial backing and a "built-in precinct organization" of church congregations throughout the state. Fowler, indeed, suggests that "the political preachers appear to have peaked in their audience appeal, one which is not large."[8]

This paper is a discussion of work in progress on the political uses of the mass media, with an emphasis on religious broadcasting. My purpose is not to judge the broadcasts in religious terms, but rather to ask what this uncertain revolution tells us about the power and limitations of the political uses of the media. I will argue, drawing upon the work of Murray Edelman and others, that the most important processes and effects of "media politics" are to be found not in the outcome of great political struggles, but rather within individuals themselves. We use the media and its messages to resolve inner tensions and

to work out our own social adjustments. We selectively retain, interpret, and discard media messages to the extent that they reassure us, help us interpret the world, identify our enemies, and confirm our prior beliefs. Whether or not the messages correspond to some "objective" social or political reality is immaterial; their meanings are constructed by us as a response to inner needs. As a result, we are not manipulated or easily mobilized by those who direct the messages at us; indeed, in the ways in which we do or do not respond to their messages, our interpretations can constrain the communicators. These notions help us understand both the limited political impact of the "electronic church", and its more enduring appeal--for at least a part of the population--on other grounds. They also suggest that for all their technical, rhetorical and symbolic sophistication, the video ministers are subject to much the same set of difficulties that hinder other political groups. The analysis also suggests the need to reassess some of our more simplistic notions of cause and effect as regards the media role in politics. Instead of searching for direct effects upon mass behavior, perhaps we should begin to understand the political effects of the media "from the inside out."

II. MOBILIZING THE CONSTITUENCY

Mobilization politics is never easy. A generation ago, E.E. Schattschneider pointed out both the importance of controlling the scope of political conflicts--many are decided by who joins

or stays out--and also the difficulties of the "mobilization of bias". Many of the largest interest groups, such as labor unions, "deliver" far fewer votes and far less political support than their leaders claim (and their critics fear). Others, he argued, need the established political parties more than the parties need them.[9]

Most people, after all, view politics from a distance, and as only one of life's concerns. Their time and resources are limited, as are their interest in and knowledge of politics. The rewards of making the effort to participate in politics are usually unclear. Moreover, many of the political appeals to which we are exposed are made from a distance, and are of dubious saliency to everyday life. Despite the growing sophistication of media techniques, evidence of decisive impacts upon mass behavior is scant[10] (critics of "manipulation" by the media have yet to show us how people can be both dully tractable, on the one hand, and yet ready to jump into political action at the drop of a subtle cue). Declining turnouts, and disillusionment with major institutions, are probably the most enduring characteristics of politics in the media age.[11]

Predictions of a mass Christian political movement mobilized over the airwaves encounter some specific problems as well. First of all, by no means do all video evangelists seek to project a strong political message. Rev. Jerry Falwell, in his "Old-Time Gospel Hour" broadcasts, his founding of Moral Majority

Incorporated (and its successor group, the Liberty Federation), and in his other activities, may project a strong political message; but Jim Bakker spends relatively little time on explicitly political concerns. Even those who do emphasize politics, such as Pat Robertson, do many other sorts of things in their broadcasts as well. The audience is even more diverse; the terms "Christian" and "Born-Again" embrace tremendous diversity of social background and religious outlook.[12] The linkage between religion and politics may be clear and compelling for some of these people, but others hold to a belief of even longer standing that worldly affairs and questions of government matter little to those concerned with salvation.

Still, it could be argued that if anyone can mobilize a political following over the airwaves, the "video ministers" should be able to do it. Their broadcasts are technically sophisticated, and are backed up by substantial fundraising and followup organizations. They not only enjoy the first-Amendment protections guaranteed to all political expression, but because of their religious character are also largely exempt from "fairness" and "equal-time" rules (and thus from the reluctance of broadcasters to accept other kinds of political programs because of the possibility of having to provide time for opponents).[13] Indeed, when the FCC agreed to count paid as well as unpaid religious broadcasts as "public service" time, it created a positive incentive for broadcasters to fulfill their license requirements while making money in the process. Video

ministers employ powerful symbols and appeals, drawn not only from the Bible and formal religious activities but also from our history, culture, and "civil religion",[14] which for many people engage a lifetime of political and religious socialization. It is true that the video ministers have their critics in groups such as Norman Lear's "People for the American Way", and that the "Christian Right" has internal divisions of its own. But while political candidates must confront an opposition party, and interest groups know that their media messages will often evoke a response from opposing interests, televangelists face no specific opposition which can compete with it in terms of media coverage and exposure. Jeffrey Hadden contends that they "have greater unrestricted access to media than any other interest group in America."[15]

Given these assets and opportunities, then, it remains an interesting question as to why the video ministers have not mobilized more of a political following than they have done. For a few tentative answers, we turn to a consideration of the ways users of the media and their audiences interact.

III. POLITICS AND THE MEDIA

Popular commentators and some scholars as well tend to conceptualize the political uses of mass media in mechanistic terms. A user of the media says "X", and if she or he says it in a sufficiently skillful manner, we then look for "Y" (or some unexpected "Z") to occur--typically in the form of a shift in

voter loyalties, or some other mass manifestation. Political persuasion is, in this view, almost a tangible form of energy, and the "force" the media exert upon people and groups is almost a form of physical momentum. Moreover, we often look at the uses of the media in isolation--both from the other factors influencing opinions and behavior, and from other (often conflicting) uses of the media as well. The search for mechanistic linkages of cause and effect encourages--indeed, demands--that we somehow isolate message X and its presumed effect Y from other political phenomena. But those who receive the message, and with whose choices we are concerned, are likely to experience it as just one part of a noisy, but distant and poorly-perceived political show. That show is in turn only one of a number of things going on in everyday life--and it takes on a different appearance from each point of view. Finally, some ignore the linkages between message and result: if people are not just pushed around like checkers, to what extent do they formulate their own reactions, and how do they do it?

The foregoing is admittedly an oversimplification. But in this section I will argue that the political uses of the media are better regarded as interactions between senders and receivers of messages than as a one-way process of A acting upon B. I will also suggest--drawing upon Edelman--that people use, adapt and discard media messages for their own needs and purposes, which may have little or nothing to do with the agendas of those sending the messages.Thus, the major effects of media messages

are to be found within individuals, rather than as overt outcomes in the political arena. The fact that we are dealing with mass media does not necessarily mean that their most important effects will be seen in mass political behavior.

Politics, for most people, is a spectator sport--one of many, indeed, which compete for shares of our time, attention, and resources. Most of us get no further into politics than casting a vote at election time--and in most elections other than the presidential, half or more of us do not even do that, despite the expensive and carefully-crafted media appeals which are directed at us. People's knowledge of politics is likewise less than extensive, particularly as pertains to the less visible but more important informal processes of influence and compromise through which important decisions are made. For most people, politics is a parade of personalities and symbols. Moreover, we construct the meanings of political messages and events for ourselves--not, as we shall see, as guidelines for action, but rather as means for easing inner anxieties.

Still, it cannot be denied that politics is important even if distant.[16] Through politics we can be taxed or subsidized, coerced or left free; we may enjoy peace, or be conscripted and even blown into oblivion. Moreover, most of us have been socialized since childhood to feel loyalty to a nation, its flag and institutions, and to identify our own wellbeing and happiness with the survival of that system. Thus politics engages complex

and potentially strong emotions which, even if not carefully reasoned-out, have much to do with the ways we react to the distant political show.

Edelman has captured this essential tension in his classic work, The Symbolic Uses of Politics:

> Politics is for most of us a passing parade of abstract symbols, yet a parade which our experience teaches us to be a benevolent or malevolent force that can be close to omnipotent. Because politics does visibly confer wealth, take life, imprison and free people, and represent a history with strong emotional and ideological associations, its processes become easy objects upon which to displace private emotions, especially strong anxieties and hopes.
>
> But it could not serve as conveyor of these fears and aspirations if it were simply a tool or mechanism which we all had the power and knowledge to manipulate for our own advantage. It is central to its potency as a symbol that it is remote, set apart, omnipresent as the ultimate threat or means of succor, yet not susceptible to effective influence through any act we as individuals can perform.[17]

Indeed, the second section of Edelman's argument suggests that politics has much in common with religion, and at a very basic level. In both instances, we encounter distant but powerful threats and reassurances with which we must somehow come to terms. Both the lack of active commitment on the part of some, and the diversity of responses among those who do actively take part in politics or religion, suggest that people make their own adjustments in their own ways. Those who seek to mobilize the masses must face the fact that even if they can send their messages to most of us, many will not respond at all, and those who do will respond in their own ways.

If this process of "coming to terms" meant merely that we adjust our perceptions and reactions to some objective outside world, or to others' more or less authoritative depictions of it, then mass mobilization would be more effective, if not necessarily easy. But the reverse is more likely: through selective perception and reinterpretation, we adjust media messages to our own internal needs. Berger and Luckmann[18] write of the "social construction of reality", in which we devise for ourselves an understanding of the world, using language, culture, and personal experience. Our political opinions likewise have more to do with our inner purposes than with an "objective" understanding of politics. Smith, Bruner and White, analyzing the formation and change of political opinions from a psychological perspective, suggest that our political opinions serve three major functions: "object appraisal", or identifying and comprehending the major elements of the outside world; "social adjustment", in which we interact with and adapt to others, talking politics and sharing opinions; and "externalizing inner conflicts", by which we interpret some of our pleasures and disappointments in political terms.[19] Of these, only the first is closely tied to "objective" political reality, as Edelman points out. With respect to social adjustment and the externalization of conflicts, our opinions and perceptions will be held, revised and discarded to the extent that they fulfill those inner functions. Whether or not they correspond with "objective" political realities is for most of us not an important concern.[20]

Thus, Nimmo and Savage,[21] in their analysis of candidates' images and our responses to them, find--not surprisingly--that voters form their images of candidates primarily in personal terms, not in terms of policy. But they also show that the most inportant personal attributes are not the shining teeth, hot-combed hair and smiling faces which are so visibly marketed through the political media, and so frequently cited by critics of modern campaigning. Instead, voters assess "personal intangibles"[22] such as candidates' strength, honesty, dependability, and compassion. These findings are important for at least three reasons. First, the importance of honesty, integrity and compassion suggests that voters do indeed seek reassuring images, rather than assessments of policy convictions or ideologies. Second, voters construct these sorts of images <u>in the almost total absence of any real evidence</u>. Virtually <u>all</u> candidates emphasize these personal intangibles in their appeals, and very few voters have any personal knowledge of how trustworthy or compassionate a candidate might be. Even when an incumbent's reputation is the basis of such an assessment--Richard Nixon is "devious", Ronald Reagan really is a "nice guy"--this represents the attribution of motives from a great distance, a reinterpretation of complex political events in personalized terms. Finally, by responding to these sorts of intangibles, the voters--the "audience"--give political communicators important cues as to what "works" and what does not.

Thus, as ordinary citizens reinterpret political messages to suit their own needs, they--far from being "manipulated" through the media--place important constraints upon political communicators through their responses or non-responses to various types of political messages. Willy Stark, in the stage play version of Robert Penn Warren's All the King's Men, learned this the hard way. After a long hot campaign spent stumping the state in favor of a "balanced tax plan" and other policy issues, he found he was losing badly--indeed, that he had been the dupe of a group of political operators who knew that such a campaign was doomed to fail. A reporter, at the end of the campaign, gave Stark some advice:

> Hell, make 'em laugh. Make 'em cry. Stir 'em up. They aren't alive, most of them and haven't been in twenty years....Hell, their wives have lost their shape, likker won't set on their stomach, and they've lost their religion, so it's up to you to stir 'em up. Make 'em feel alive again. For half an hour. They'll love you for it. Hell, heat 'em up.[23]

Stark took her advice, and in the next campaign won by a landslide. Warren was writing about a demagogue, to be sure, but this lesson has still been readily visible in recent years. Walter Mondale probably could not have won the 1984 presidential election no matter what he did; but future candidates will note if given the choice between promising to raise taxes, or showing people soothing, reassuring images of happy children, cute puppy dogs, and sunny mornings down on the farm, they should do the latter. Our political campaigns have been rightly criticized by many for their empty hoopla and vapid policy discourse; but for

better or worse, we are given the kinds of campaigns we have shown we will respond to.

Edelman has noted this sort of process at work in the selection and portrayal of news stories through the mass media, arguing that "Officials, reporters, and interested groups depict news events in ways that will appeal to audiences. In that basic sense the audiences create news stories rather than being created by them."[24] It is a commonplace observation by now that most of what is in the newspaper is not really "news", and that television news is packaged, presented and received primarily as entertainment. But the long-term effects are more basic:

> The parade of "news" about political events reported to us by the mass media and drunk up by the public as drama...has everything: remoteness, the omnipotent state, crises, and detentes. More than that, it has the blurring or absence of any realistic detail that might question or weaken the symbolic meaning we read into it. It is no accident of history or of culture that our newspapers and television present little news, that they overdramatize what they report, and that most citizens have only a foggy knowledge of public affairs though often an intensely felt one. If political acts are to promote social adjustment and are to mean what our inner problems require that they mean, then these acts have to be dramatic in outline and empty of realistic detail. In this sense publishers and broadcast licensees are telling the exact truth when they excuse their poor performance with the plea that they give the public what it wants. It wants symbols and not news.[25]

If people use symbols and messages for purposes of inner adjustment, and if these processes take place without much regard to "objective" assessments of reality, then symbols, messages, and appeals will be all the more useful if they do not raise

contradictions and doubts. In this connection Edelman notes that one attribute of powerful political symbols is their ambiguity. If we can read into a symbol more or less what we please, then it will be particularly useful for social adjustment and externalizing inner conflicts. We need not rethink our political views (and analysts need not assume infinite webs of self-delusion, or that political "reality" has the consistency of Silly Putty, in order to account for the persistence of opinions in the face of contradictory events.) Ambiguous symbols and images abound in our politics: Richard Nixon's "Great Silent Majority" (all the more ambiguous because it could never speak for itself!) performed such a function, as did his well-known technique of being specific about what he was against, but vague about what he was for. So did the soothing Reagan televison advertisements of 1984, as well as their distant ancestors, Gerald Ford's "I'm feeling good about America, I'm feeling good about me" spots of 1976. More general concepts such as "free enterprise" and "equal opportunity" reconcile the success of the "haves" with the distress of the "have nots", and simultaneously account for and discount the persistence of want in a land of plenty. And the symbol of "Communism" can encapsulate just about any evil one cares to comprehend.

If political discourse does indeed consist mostly of the repetitious invocation of ambigous symbols and appeals--what Edelman terms in some places "myth and ritual", and in others simply "banality"[26]--then politics would seem much more likely to

bore people than to arouse them. And if we selectively receive, interpret and discard political messages in order to avoid potential social conflicts and to resolve inner tensions--rather than as guides to aggressive action--then we must question how much it is possible to mobilize a mass following through the media. Indeed, Edelman argues that most political symbols produce quiescence, not an aroused response.[27] Ronald Reagan's "nice guy" image is thus not the driving wedge for a massive right-wing movement; indeed, polls throughout his presidency have shown that while the public likes Reagan the man, it often disagrees with his policy. Instead, the image produces quiescence in the form of the "Teflon" factor, in which negative events and policy issues simply do not "stick"--they do not figure into popular assessments of the President.

These arguments are not intended to suggest that users of the media have no effects at all upon their audiences, or that they are totally imprisoned by the lowest common denominator of mass response. We know, for example, that media use is linked to important learning processes, and plays an important role in political socialization.[28] Moreover, media news broadcasts perform an agenda-setting function, influencing our impressions of what the day's important problems are, and of their relative importance.[29] As Cohen has argued, "...the mass media may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but the media are stunningly successful in telling their audience what to think about."[30] But these effects are limited: Graber

points out that in areas about which we have little experience or knowledge, images are "stimulus-determined", while in areas in which we do have preexisting knowledge and opinions, images are more likely to be "perceiver-determined". This last notion in particular suggests that while one may use the media to develop a loyal following, not only will it be difficult to mobilize that following into political action (if symbols are reinterpreted in service of inner needs, and tend to produce quiescence), but also the more one "preaches to the committed", the more difficult mobilization can become.

Instead, these arguments have been offered in order to point out the complexities inherent in the political use of the media--by "televangelists", or by anyone else--and to refocus our attention upon the kinds of consequences we should be searching for. If this perspective is valid, we should not be surprised at the loyal followings enjoyed by prominent video preachers. But we should also recognize that many of the most important effects of their messages are to be found within individuals, not in the outcomes of elections or in legislation.

These arguments have so far been made in very general terms; in the section to come, I will apply them to the current state of affairs in the "video church".

IV. VIDEO MINISTERS AND THEIR FOLLOWINGS

A full analysis of the political role of religious broadcasting

will require an extensive body of evidence, one which is not yet in hand. Still, the outlines of such an analysis can be set forth. Edelman's perspective does indeed help us understand both the individual appeal, and the political limitations, of the "video church". It suggests that while televangelists will continue to hold a substantial following, and will perhaps enlarge that following at the margins, the direct impact of their political messages will be modest. Like most other interest groups, political preachers will find that they must compete against a variety of interests in attempting to influence national policy, and that a mass following does not neccessarily translate into influence at the polls, or at the decision-making level.

Many of Edelman's characterizations apply to the video church. Televangelists do discuss distant, yet emotion-laden concerns (primarily of a religious nature, but raising political issues as well). And they do so through the skillful use of symbols of many sorts; even a short look at their programs shows us conventional religious symbols, eye-catching graphics, and scenes from many aspects of life--some personal, some distant--interpreted in religious terms. Many of these symbols are what Edelman, drawing upon the work of Edward Sapir, calls "condensation symbols":

> Condensation symbols evoke the emotions associated with the situation. They condense into one symbolic event, sign or act patriotic pride, anxieties, remembrances of past glories or humiliations, promises of future greatness: some one of these or all of them.[31]

The cross, the American flag, pictures of families at prayer, and more threatening images of problems such as crime, drug use, and the advance of Communism are just a few examples of condensation symbols. All are readily visible in religious broadcasts. At the same time, many of the symbols and appeals are ambiguous: political problems and reforms are often discussed in sweeping, general terms. Enemies abound, but are identified in similarly ambiguous terms: "drug dealers", "pornographers", or (in a different vein) "secular humanists." The ambiguity of these symbols, however, allows viewers to find in them whatever they wish. They are, as Edelman argued in the case of news stories, "dramatic in outline and empty of realistic detail."[32]

Another characteristic is the frequent and skillful appeal to emotions. "Mainstream" religious broadcasts, frequently by denominations affiliated with the National Council of Churches, dominated religious broadcasting for years, and by their religious nature employed many of the same symbols and appeals as do the modern televangelists. But the mainstream broadcasts were not aimed at the emotions. The evangelical preachers, by contrast, knew well the "make 'em laugh, make 'em cry" lessons taught Willie Stark; indeed, a longtime "fringe" status and persistent money problems made such an approach a matter of survival. When technological developments and changes in FCC policies gave the evangelical preachers wider access to television, they swept all before them with their appeals to

emotion--a development seen in trends in actual church attendance and membership as well.

But the televangelists, like any other users of the media, are constrained by their audiences--indeed, powerfully so. Money is the primary reason: much of the growth in evangelical broadcasting has come in the form of paid programs, and for these each broadcast in each market must eventually "pay for itself". Video evangelists interested in building networks and other larger enterprises have an even greater need for money. And because the evangelists must appeal directly for voluntary contributions, they are in a sense more at the mercy of audience response than other producers and advertisers, who broadcast to larger, carefully-targeted audiences, and who often seek long-term loyalty to a product or brand name and thus need not ask people to write a check or make a pledge on the spot.

If Edelman is correct, viewers will decide whether or not to respond in terms of their own situations and perceptions. Each such process of choice will be, at least to a degree, unique. While experienced video preachers obviously know which fundraising techniques have worked best in the past, there is still a strong incentive to "play it safe"--to make sure that broadcasts have a little bit of something for almost everybody. Many of the most successful broadcasts, such as "The 700 Club", are as a result a <u>potpourri</u> of music, pictures, graphics, and diverse sorts of appeals--none very demanding, all engaging

emotions, and all presented in a comfortable talk-show format which allows easy movement from item to the next. Even a Jimmy Swaggart, whose mainstay is straightforward, dynamic preaching, also produces "softer" segments and programs of music, of history and scenes from the Holy and Land, and the like. The messages are less a set of political marching orders than a careful attempt to fit the appeals to as large an audience as possible.

The same diversity can be found in the political content as well. In 1983, I conducted a telephone survey of 241 respondents in the greater Pittsburgh area.[33] It included questions on use of various media, and a series of items intended to tap the strength of Daniel Elazar's three American political subcultures--the Moralistic, the Individualistic, and the Traditionalistic. A full discussion of these subcultures is beyond the scope of this paper; but briefly put, the Moralistic political culture views society as a commonwealth, places strong emphasis on questions of right and wrong, and is concerned with the overall goals of government and society. The Individualistic subculture, by contrast, regards society as a marketplace in which people and groups succeed or fail on their own; politics is about individual or small-group advantage, not shared social goals, and matters of right and wrong receive less emphasis. In the Traditionalistic subculture, society is seen as a commonwealth, but a paternalistic one; authority is vested in traditional figures, and the individual is not expected to participate extensively in politics or to question or judge his betters. The

Individualistic subculture is strongest in the northeast, the Moralistic in the midwest and west, and the Traditionalistic in the south.[34]

I used the data to examine, among other things, the relationship between respondents' political values and their media use. Perhaps because of the historical links between Traditionalistic politics and evangelical religion, I expected "Traditionalists" to be the most frequent viewers of religious broadcasts. I found, however, that after personal background was taken into account, more frequent viewing was associated with stronger expressions of <u>all three</u> subcultures. This finding, while surprising at the time, may make sense: from a political standpoint, the "video church" offers something for almost everyone. There are old-time religion and traditional values for Traditionalists, heavy emphasis on ultimate goals and questions of right and wrong for Moralists, and themes of individual self-reliance, upward mobility, and conventional capitalism for Individualists. People with strong political views, it seems, can find in the "video church" vivid expressions of political values similar to their own, despite the diversity of their outlooks.

These results, we should recall, are from a survey of only one metropolitan area, and no televangelist necessarily presents all of these orientations continuously. But on one broadcast or another there is something for almost anyone. This diverse

strategy makes sense as a way to help build a following; but it does not seem a promising way to moblilize a disciplines following in pursuit of a specific political agenda.

There is no doubt that video preachers have been able to build a large and loyal following, and that political appeals have for some played a major role in that process. But the uses to which such followings can be put are another question. Fundraising, as suggested above, must come first; and political appeals may be more accurately seen as means to that end in most cases, rather than a real agenda in their own right. Edelman points out that in many such instances, symbols are in fact a substitute for the activities and goals which they represent,[35] and such may be the case here as well. One may indeed be upset by current social problems and government policy; but one really cannot do very much about them. Watching a broadcast, however, and perhaps making a contribution to a preacher who brings a vivid message about these problems, may be the next best thing. And once that is done, one may in fact have assuaged some inner anxieties, at least for a time.

V. CONCLUSION

Televangelism is thus best regarded as a dialogue between communicators and audience, not a magical tool by which the few manipulate the behavior of the many. This is not an assertion that the video preachers have somehow failed, for their followings suggest that they are succeeding--perhaps more than

anyone else--at what the mass media can do best: to engage, through the skillful use of symbols, the inner conflicts and anxieties of large numbers of people, and then to skillfully read and adapt the message to the responses which the audience is constantly transmitting back. If this activity sounds circular, it is; but so, it must be said, are many of the other ritualistic and repetitive activities which make up the visible face of politics.

Whether or not the televangelists constitute some sort of political "threat" cannot be decided here. But to the extent that this analysis is correct, some of the more dire predictions voiced by critics of the ministers seem unlikely to come true. When video evagelists venture into politics, the rules of the game are not automatically suspended; for all their visibility in the media, the Liberty Federation, Pat Robertson's presidential campaigns, and other political manifestations of the "New Christian Right" are subject to the same sorts of difficulties and opportunities faced by more conventional political groups.

One of the more important implications of this argument has to do with cause and effect in politics. Particularly when it comes to the political uses of mass media, mechanistic notions of cause and effect may distract us from some of the more intriguing political processes going on within individuals, while encouraging us to search for grand consequences of a sort which we are unlikely ever to find. People are not like billiard

balls, rolling in the directions they are pushed. The intentions of those who send media may have little or nothing to do with the results (if any) which are obtained. And the audience, acting upon individual needs and motives not even necessarily understood by themselves, can through its reactions powerfully act back upon the communicators. This is an imperfect and ironic kind of democracy, one in which it is very difficult to arouse "the people"; but it is also one which is at least resistant to manipulation by the users of the mass media.

NOTES

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1. R.B. Fowler, Religion and Politics in America. (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1985), 218.

2. See J. Hadden, Prime-Time Preachers. (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1981); William Martin, "The Birth of the Media Myth", Atlantic, June 1981; Tina Rosenberg, "How the Media Made the Moral Majority," Washington Monthly (May 1982); Frances Fitzgerald, "A Disciplined, Charging Army", UX[The New Yorker] (May 18, 1981.

3. "Power, Glory and Politics," Time, 17 February 1986, pp. 62-69

4. Ibid., p. 62.

5. "Born-Again Politics", Washington Post, 30 March 1980, p. C-1.

6. Fowler, p. 221.

7. Survey of July 11-14, 1986, as reported in "Bush Heavy Favorite for GOP", Syracuse Post-Standard, 15 August 1986, p. A-11.

8. Fowler, p. 221.

9. E.E. Schattschneider, The Semisovereign People. (New York:

Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), Ch. 2,3.

10. An early work alleging such impacts, but in the absence of evidence, was Joe McGinniss, The Selling of the President 1968. (New York: Trident, 1969). A much better survey of research appears in Doris A. Graber, Mass Media in American Politics, 2d. ed. (Washington: CQ Press, 1984), Ch. 5.

11. See Austin Ranney's discussion of television's "fast-forward effect" upon our political expectations, and of the ways in which television makes governing more difficult, in A. Ranney, Channels of Power: The Impact of Television on American Politics. (New York: Basic Books, 1983.

12. Michael Johnston, "The New Christian Right in American Politics," The Political Quarterly 53:2 (1982), pp. 181-199.

13. Graber, Ch. 4.

14. Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," in R. E. Richey and D.G. Jones, eds., American Civil Religion. (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

15. Quoted in Time, "Power, Glory--and Politics," p. 63.

16. Murray Edelman, The Symbolic Uses of Politics. (Urbana: Univeristy of Illinois Press, 1985 rev. ed.), pp. 5-6.

17. Ibid., pp. 5-6.

18. P.L. Berger and T. Luckmann, The Social Construction of

Reality. (New York: Doubleday, 1966).

19. M.B. Smith, J.S. Bruner, and R.W. White, Opinions and Personality. (New York: Wiley, 1956).

20. Edelman, p. 8.

21. D. Nimmo and R.L. Savage, Candidates and their Images: Concepts, Attitudes and Findings. (Santa Monica, CA: Goodyear, 1976).

22. Ibid., Ch. 3,4,6.

23. Robert Penn Warren, All the King's Men: A Play. (New York: Random House, 1960), p. 40.

24. Edelman, p. 205.

25. Ibid., p. 9.

26. Ibid., pp. 16-19, 209-211.

27. Ibid., pp. 14-15.

28. Graber, Ch. 5.

29. Shanto Iyengar, Mark D. Peters, and Donald R. Kinder, "Experimental Demonstrations of the 'Not-So-Minimal' Consequences of Television News Programs," American Political Science Review 76:4 (December 1982), pp. 848-858.

30. B. Cohen, The Press and Foreign Policy. (Princeton:

Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 16.

31. Edelman, p. 6. Like Sapir, Edelman originally distinguished between condensation and referential symbols--the latter serving simply to identify political objects. But Edelman has since argued (p. 198) that there are no purely referential symbols.

32. Edelman, p. 9.

33. The survey is described in Michael Johnston, "Right and Wrong in American Politics," Polity 18:3 (Spring 1986), pp. 367-391.

34. An extensive discussion of the three subcultures appears in Daniel J. Elazar, American Federalism: A View from the States, 3d. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), Ch. 5,6.

35. Edelman, p. 9.